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NY CULTURE

## When Their Internet Went Down, These Brothers Stood Up

Brooklyn Fiber Is Expanding to More Brooklyn Neighborhoods This Summer



Brothers Rob Veksler, left, and Eric started Brooklyn Fiber in 2011 out of frustration with their own Internet service. *KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **JACKIE SNOW**

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Lousy Internet service is a ubiquitous gripe across New York: It's slow, it's down or you have trouble getting through your provider's automated phone system.

But two brothers did more than complain. They took matters into their own hands and started an Internet service provider company.

Now, three years after Eric and Rob Veksler installed their first antenna on the roof of

the Fairway grocery store in Red Hook, Brooklyn Fiber is expanding to Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill and Sunset Park. And plans are in the works to bring more neighborhoods online.

"It's the most important city in the world with the worst Internet I've ever used," said Eric Veksler, 31 years old.

The brothers did months of research before finally deciding to cash in their savings and launch Brooklyn Fiber.

Having worked in information technology for years, Eric Veksler provided the know-how to set up the broadband and wireless network. And Rob Veksler, 41, organized the business side—at about the same time he was setting up Vekslers, a restaurant and bar he owns in Cobble Hill.

Brooklyn Fiber's several hundred customers are mostly businesses, the Vekslers said, although it serves a few residential accounts in buildings that have no or poor Internet access. The brothers said they hope to double their customer base in the expansion this summer, with much of the growth coming from residences.



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Better customer service is the way that the brothers have distinguished themselves from the big Internet providers. Eric Veksler's personal cellphone number, for example, is

listed on the company's website for customers who are having problems.

Liberty Warehouse, an event space in Red Hook, signed up with Brooklyn Fiber early this year even though it had months left on a contract with Time Warner Cable.

"It's not even close," said Jeffrey Torem, director of Liberty Warehouse. "I canceled Time Warner. [The Vekslers] have been so much better."

The few times that Liberty Warehouse has had problems with its service, Eric Veksler has come right away to fix it.

Time Warner Cable offers phone, email, live chat and Twitter help for customers and tries to schedule a service call within 24 hours for a customer whose Internet is down, said public relations manager Ziggy Chau.

"We're used to serving customers in a competitive environment, and we're focused on transforming the TWC customer experience, rolling out dramatically faster Internet everywhere we operate in New York City by year-end," Mr. Chau said.

Being able to maintain a high-level of customer service is one reason that the brothers say the expansion has been so slow. They haven't even wired Rob Veksler's restaurant or Eric Veksler's apartment in Carroll Gardens.

Like Time Warner Cable, major provider Verizon FiOS says it offer good customer service as well. John Bonomo, the director of Verizon Media Relations, pointed to a 2013 American Customer Satisfaction Index survey that ranked Verizon FiOS first for customer satisfaction.

Both Verizon FiOS and Time Warner Cable also offer cable television and phone service for one-stop shopping, Mr. Bonomo and Mr. Chau said; Brooklyn Fiber offers only Internet.

Brooklyn Fiber is one of only a few Internet provider startups. Sonic and Monkey Brains, both in San Francisco, are the two that Eric Veksler counts as peers.

The Vekslers said they get at least one email a day from someone wanting to know how to become an Internet provider. But few of the interested parties ever follow through after they learn about the high upfront costs and expertise needed in both setting up

hardware and running a network. Plus, gaining access to buildings to set up a service requires gaining trust from building owners.

"People in America have gotten fed up with high prices and low quality of our Internet providers," said Susan Crawford, visiting professor at Harvard Law School and author of "Captive Audience: The Telecom Industry and Monopoly Power in the New Gilded Age."

Ms. Crawford said most of the new providers are municipalities because upfront costs are high and profits come in slowly—the opposite of a good business model for startups.

But, she adds, if a startup can differentiate itself with customer service, upload capacity and price, there is a market.

"We are impatient people," Ms. Crawford said.

### Sizing Up Networks

How Brooklyn Fiber's basic monthly business plan stacks up against those offered by Time Warner Cable and Verizon FiOS:

**Brooklyn Fiber:** \$75, with no contract, for a static Internet Protocol address, which makes access more reliable for businesses hosting a website or using a VPN, a secure way of accessing sensitive information from a business's servers. Download speeds are 15 megabits a second and uploads are 2 Mbps.

**Time Warner:** \$92, one-year contract; one-time \$30 fee for a static IP address. Speeds are 10 Mbps for downloads and 1 Mbps for uploads.

**Verizon FiOS:** \$119, with no contract, for a static IP address. Speeds are 50 Mbps for downloads and 25 Mbps for uploads.

—Sources: The companies

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